# onstruction of the **Civic Center**

## Groundbreaking ceremony

Just three weeks after the receipt of the telegram, the groundbreaking ceremony commenced at the site on the morning of December 5, 1935. George Marston was chosen to turn the first earth with a golden shovel. He stated:

"We have met here to inaugurate the building of the Civic Center of the County and City of San Diego. Although these exercises are very informal and simple, the occasion itself is one of profound significance. In your name and behalf, I now lift the first bit of earth on the foundation of the Civic Center."34

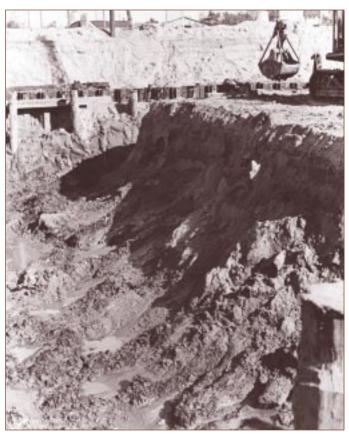
About 200 people including city, county, state and federal officials observed the ceremonies at the waterfront site. For many of them, this ceremony symbolized the realization of efforts that had been expended for decades. Actual construction would begin a month later on January 4, 1936.



Top Right: The Civic Center site as construction began. Bottom Right: Excavation gets under way.



State Relief Commission Chairman Ralph Jenney, WPA Administrator Frank McLaughlin, Mayor Percy Benbough and Supervisor Ed Hastings worked to ensure that San Diego's Civic Center would be built.



### Making Engineering History

The tidelands site, like that of Lindbergh Field, consisted of leftover fill from dredging projects. There had been considerable concern that the site was incapable of supporting a large, heavy structure, in part because the site had been submerged prior to 1914. This, in addition to the earthquake concern, demanded that construction begin in a scrupulous fashion. The Long Beach earthquake of 1933 influenced engineering design; the devastating quake had called into question existing building techniques, meaning that any major new project required a new approach. Hamill commented in retrospect that:

"Local architects didn't believe [the Civic Center] would ever exist. One reason they didn't take it too seriously was the Long Beach earthquake. That put a death sentence on a lot of buildings." 35

The demand for safety overrode economic concerns in virtually every element of construction. Engineers planned for steel pilings, rather than wood pilings, to prevent shearing in the event of an earthquake. Structural engineer H.H. Davies brought in more than 1,500 H-shaped steel pilings (varying in length from 32 feet to 35 feet) that were driven deep into the ground to support the weight of the building. Load tests were undertaken to determine the security of the foundation; the first piles that were driven in revealed that foundation conditions were better than had been expected. Opponents of the tidelands site had claimed that the pilings would have to be driven to tremendous depths in order to secure a firm base; this would have been a costly and impractical method of constructing the building. But firm sandstone was encountered under the dredging fill, and the test borings went 40 feet into the sandstone area with no indication of finding the bottom.36



County of San Diego



County San Diego

The Civic Center project made engineering history with its use of steel pilings.

The Civic Center received substantial recognition for the construction of the site, as it was considered to be on the cutting edge of engineering developments. On one occasion *The San Diego Union* proclaimed:

[The steel pilings] are alternated and reinforced in all directions so that, should an earthquake occur, they will be able to withstand more strain than any type known to exist in any other building, anywhere. The stress and strain have been figured out in thousandths of an inch, not only on paper but by actual tests <sup>37</sup>

The Civic Center project was virtually making engineering history for using steel pilings to bear lateral stresses for the first time in the history of construction. <sup>38</sup>The piles were capped with concrete below the water line and connected with concrete beams to form a continuous grid under each section of the building. <sup>39</sup>

The building's tower was designed to rest on a reinforced concrete slab six-feet thick that was set on hydraulically compacted sand for further support. The foundation and frame were built with reinforced concrete; the building itself was constructed in five separate sections. The gaps between the various sections were closed with metal accordion and slip joints so that each section could move independently in the event of an earthquake.

Left: A close-up look at the steel pilings used in building the Civic Center.

### From the ground up

The WPA was responsible for the design, grading and preparation of the site, in addition to the foundation and construction of the basement and first floor of the building. <sup>40</sup> The first portion of the project consisted of excavating test pits for the foundation. The construction of the Civic Center was affected by the shallow water table, which was only three feet below the level of the basement. This high level required that the first floor be built partly above the ground in a style that was considered slightly outdated. By the time the surface was poured on the first floor, the structure reached the 13.5 foot level.

The jurisdiction of the WPA ended with the completion of the foundation, and the construction of the remaining four stories of the building was placed in the hands of local contractors. An Roosevelt turned the balance of the WPA money over to the City and County administrators to finish the project. As soon as it was determined that private contractors could complete the job, closed bids were given,





From the ground up: These photos are part of a series chronicling the progression of the building.

Photos: County of San Diego

and the contract was awarded to the lowest bidder, B.O. Larsen Construction Company (with a bid of \$449,900). Under regulations set by the WPA, B.O. Larsen was required to do at least 25 percent of the remaining work, and dozens of San Diego businesses that served as subcontractors were to complete the remaining 75 percent.

The construction of the Civic Center did not always run as planned; work on the project certainly had its setbacks. The first was the result of a labor problem that had little to do directly with the Civic Center. A dock strike had tied up shipping from San Francisco to San Diego, <sup>42</sup> and as a result of the strike, lumber destined for San Diego remained



aboard ships docked in the harbor. Work at the Civic Center had to be halted, generating a layoff of more than 40 people. After a two-month standstill in construction, a local lumber company agreed to furnish the lumber needed for the project. Another problem arose out of a misunderstanding when the city jail had originally been included in plans for the Civic Center. As the time approached for the jail to be built, a number of influential San Diegans spoke in opposition to the proposal; they apparently felt that it would detract from the surroundings of the new Civic Center. Finally the Harbor Commission, City Council, and city Planning Commission approved another location for the jail, which (along with a new courthouse) was scheduled to begin construction in 1938 through WPA funds. 44

Despite the delays during construction, the work was undertaken with a thorough and precise approach that gave the finished product a lasting distinction. Especially notable was the attention to detail, such as the decision to cover the building with cement painted by hand rather than use modern spray guns. In addition, the desire to bring down the cost

of construction sparked considerable inventive energy; the general superintendent of construction, H.E. Moore, remarked that on no other large construction job in San Diego had so much of the equipment and tools been manufactured on the site as they were needed. 45 An example was the idea of producing "powered buggies," converted Model-T chassis with planetary gears and foot pedals, to haul concrete around within the structure. This greatly eased the workload, since concrete had been hauled manually by carts prior to this innovation. Flexibility and resourcefulness of those in charge helped contribute to the eagerness and high morale of the construction workers. In January 1936, The San Diego Union noted:

They are doing more than merely working on a job. They are constructing a building

in which they are taking pride. This is evidenced by the attendance at the weekly "school" that is maintained on the site. For two hours each Wednesday night, the workmen are invited to attend a class where they are instructed in the phase of work they are doing at that particular stage of the project. Attendance is voluntary, and no pay is available for those who go, but out of the 200 men on the job, the attendance ranges from 100 to 156. 46

Enthusiasm for the project appeared strong on all fronts: workers relished the employment opportunity in the midst of the Depression; the citizens of San Diego were interested in watching their Civic Center take shape on the harborfront; and County and municipal administrations were pleased with the outcome of years of planning.

Contractor Charles Hoskins completed the last construction phase 90 days ahead of schedule. The San Diego City and County Administration Building cost \$1,730,474 and its construction provided employment for more than 300 people.





#### **Dedication ceremony for the Civic Center**

Before the Civic Center's completion, local officials began thinking ahead to the building's dedication. The newspaper had reported that President Roosevelt was leaving from San Diego for an equatorial cruise on July 16, 1938. Because of the role Roosevelt played in the Civic Center's start, officials wanted him to dedicate the building. In recognition of Jenney's efforts to obtain federal aid, the County Board of Supervisors and the Council of the City of San Diego had commissioned him to extend the invitation. The President accepted the offer, and Jenney agreed to chair a group of City and County leaders welcoming Roosevelt to town.

On the day of the dedication, Roosevelt arrived by train to Los Angeles, then boarded an automobile at the head of a 25-car motorcade bound for San Diego. In preparation for the president's

arrival, many stores throughout the city closed their doors that afternoon. In addition, because military aircraft would be flying in formation for the ceremony, all of Lindbergh Field's commercial air traffic was halted from noon until after the ceremony. President Roosevelt arrived at the dedication site around 3 p.m. before an estimated crowd of 25,000 spectators. The presidential car stopped on the dedication ramp, where the president was greeted with honors from the army and



Historical Collection, Title Insurance and Trust Company, Union Title Office

President Roosevelt addressed the crowd from his car.



The San Diego Union

An estimated crowd of 25,000 people gathered for the Civic Center's dedication.

Marine guards and a 21-gun salute. He received greetings from dedication chairman Ralph Jenney and Mayor Percy Benbough. Mary Marston, granddaughter of George W. Marston, also presented him with a golden key to the building.<sup>47</sup> Roosevelt gave a short speech in which he remarked about the engraved quote above the building's western entrance:

"I would like to say that I like especially the sentiment expressed on the face of [the portal], "The noblest motive is the public good." I think if we all carry that motto in our hearts, in every city and community in the land, there is no question but the proper thing, American democracy, will survive."

After the ceremony, President Roosevelt left aboard the U.S.S. Houston for his equatorial fishing cruise. Although the visit had been brief, Roosevelt's dedication of the building was the figurative icing on the cake for many citizens of San Diego. They had not only received a stunning new Civic Center for governmental business that would serve as an aesthetic landmark, but had also been visited by the man who had worked so hard to stabilize the nation's economy through public employment. It was the kind of gesture that a poverty-stricken nation could look to with a mixture of appreciation and hope, and San Diegans showed this through the tremendous turnout at the dedication ceremony.

### Occupation of the new building

The dedication ceremony took place five months prior to completion of the building, which was celebrated by opening ceremonies on December 23, 1938. The County and City employees slowly began to trickle in; the City offices were to occupy the southern side of the building, and County departments would be housed in the northern half. Despite the increased room of the new facilities, not all governmental activities were centralized at the Civic Center when it was completed. The City Council and the County Supervisors selected the departments that would relocate.

While every office previously housed in City Hall would move, the list of offices that were to remain where they were was extensive: all courts, both Municipal and Superior; the County Clerk; part of the District Attorney's office; the Sheriff, Probation and Welfare, as well as the Grand Jury. The City and County virtually vacated rented downtown quarters, with departments moving to either the Civic Center or to the courthouse.

As a result of constructing the new Civic Center, more government offices were housed at one location than ever before in San Diego history, but with a wider geographic spread of administrative and judicial activity.<sup>49</sup>



A group photograph of the County's Assessors Office, soon after moving into their new offices in the Civic Center. Photograph courtesy of former County employee Cathleen (Jean Speir) Gray (pictured center, first row standing).